

Message Text

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PAGE 01 BUENOS 04226 021542Z
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C O N F I D E N T I A L BUENOS AIRES 4226

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: SHUM, AR
SUBJECT: HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH: RECENT EVENTS

SUMMARY. THE CATHOLIC CHURCH MARSHALLED ITS CONSIDERABLE
POWER IN MAY OF 1977 TO SPEAK PUBLICLY AGAINST HUMAN
RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN ARGENTINA. DURING APRIL AND MAY
OF 1978 THE CHURCH SIGNALLED AGAIN ITS INTEREST IN THIS
THEME, THIS TIME IN A PRIVATE LETTER TO THE GOVERNMENT
AND IN PRIVATE DELIBERATIONS AMONG THE BISHOPS. SOME
REMARK THAT THESE EFFORTS HAVE LED TO A HEALTHY
EXCHANGE BETWEEN CHURCHMEN AND MEMBERS OF PRESIDENT
VIDELA'S STAFF. GENERALLY SPEAKING HOWEVER ARGENTINA'S
BISHOPS SEEM TO HAVE DECIDED TO TAKE UP THEIR DIFFERENCES
WITH THE GOVERNMENT PRIVATELY AND QUIETLY.
END SUMMARY.

1. TWO RECENT EVENTS DEMONSTRATE THE CATHOLIC
CHURCH'S CONTINUING CONCERN ABOUT ARGENTINA'S
HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION: AN EXCHANGE OF LETTERS
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PAGE 02 BUENOS 04226 021542Z

BETWEEN THE EPISCOPATE AND GENERAL VIDELA DURING
MARCH AND APRIL, AND DISCUSSIONS OF THE SITUATION
IN THE COUNTRY THAT TOOK PLACE DURING A REUNION
OF THE COUNTRY'S 86 BISHOPS APRIL 24-29. IT HAD
BEEN ALMOST A YEAR SINCE THE CHURCH FIRST SPOKE
OUT ON THE SUBJECT OF DISAPPEARANCES, KIDNAPPINGS,
LACK OF GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO INQUIRIES BY THE

CHURCH HIERARCHY, TORTURE AND MISTREATMENT, AND THE EFFECTS OF THE GOVERNMENT'S ECONOMIC POLICY ON THE POOR. THE BISHOP'S OPEN LETTER TO THE GOVERNMENT IN MAY, 1977 WAS THE HIGH WATER MARK OF THE CHURCH'S PUBLIC EFFORTS TO RAISE HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES HERE. THAT LETTER, FRANK AND CRITICAL, PRODUCED A STRONG REACTION IN THE GOVERNMENT AND RESULTED IN EFFORTS TO RESOLVE PROBLEMS OF INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS OF THE CHURCH AND OPENED A QUIET DIALOGUE WITH THE CHURCH'S LEADERS THROUGH A MONTHLY LUNCHEON MEETING BETWEEN THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS OF THE BISHOP'S COUNCIL AND THE SECRETARIES GENERAL OF THE ARMED SERVICES AND THE PRESIDENCY.

2. SINCE MAY 1977 THE CHURCH HAS ADOPTED A QUIETER POLICY. RECENTLY, ON MARCH 14, THE BISHOPS SENT ANOTHER LETTER FOLLOWING A CHURCH CONCLAVE SPECIFICALLY CALLED TO EXAMINE THE COUNTRY'S SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONDITIONS. THIS LETTER WAS NOT MADE PUBLIC -- ACCORDING TO ONE RELIABLE SOURCE "BECAUSE PUBLISHING THE LETTER LAST YEAR HADN'T DONE MUCH GOOD, SO THIS TIME IT WAS SENT TO THE PRESIDENT WITH COPIES TO OTHER MEMBERS OF THE JUNTA, IN HOPES THAT ITS CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 03 BUENOS 04226 021542Z

CONTENTS WOULD SEEP DOWN TO THE 'WORKING LEVELS' OF GOVERNMENT.." CONCERNS EXPRESSED WERE THE SAME AS BEFORE ALTHOUGH, ACCORDING TO THE SAME SOURCE, THE SECOND LETTER WAS MORE A "LAUNDRY LIST" OF INCIDENTS AND PARTICULARS CONTRIBUTED BY MANY CHURCH MEMBERS. THE LETTER SPOKE OF "EXCESSES" COMMITTED BY SECURITY FORCES.

3. THE 1978 LETTER FROM ALL REPORTS EVOKED A SHARP RESPONSE FROM PRESIDENT VIDELA, WHO DELIVERED HIS REPLY AT AN APRIL 10 LUNCHEON WITH CARDINALS PRIMATESTA, ARAMBURU AND ZAZPE, PRESIDENT AND VICE PRESIDENTS OF THE BISHOPS' CONFERENCE. WHAT REPORTEDLY STUNG VIDELA WAS THE BISHOPS' REFERENCE TO "POLITICAL PRISONERS," TO WHICH HE REPLIED THAT ONLY "SUBVERSIVE DELINQUENTS" AND PERSONS GUILTY OF ECONOMIC CRIMES WERE BEING HELD, AND THAT AS FOR DETAINED PRIESTS IT WAS HIS OPINION THEY WERE UNWORTHY TO THE STATUS THEY HELD. TO THE BISHOPS' LETTER'S COMPLAINTS OF DISAPPEARANCES VIDELA REPLIED THAT EFFORTS WERE BEING MADE TO TRACK DOWN THE MISSING

BUT THAT BLAME FOR THE EFFECTS OF SUBVERSION WERE HARDLY
THE GOVERNMENT'S TO BEAR ALONE.

4. VIDELA'S REPLY WAS PASSED ON TO ALL OF
ARGENTINA'S BISHOPS WHEN THEY ASSEMBLED IN
SAN MIGUEL APRIL 24-29 -- BASICALLY TO FORMULATE THE
ARGENTINE CHURCH'S POSITION AT THE FORTHCOMING
CONFERENCE OF LATIN AMERICAN BISHOPS AT PUEBLA,
MEXICO. A SOFT COMMUNIQUE WAS ISSUED BY
THE BISHOPS ON APRIL 29 CITING THE NEED TO
"FULFILL JUSTICE IN ECONOMIC AND LABOR RELATIONS,"
TO ACHIEVE "PACIFICATION OF THE ARGENTINE FAMILY"
AND TO FOREGO METHODS AND DOCTRINES .. CONTRARY
TO THE GOSPEL." TO THOSE AWARE OF CHURCH-STATE
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PAGE 04 BUENOS 04226 021542Z

HISTORY IN HUMAN RIGHTS THE MESSAGE IS CLEAR,
BUT THE APRIL 1978 DOCUMENT IS FAR LESS SPECIFIC
AND HARD HITTING THAN ITS MAY 1977 "COUNTERPART."

5. SOME EMBASSY HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATION
SOURCES BELIEVE THERE MAY HAVE BEEN SOME BEHIND-
THE-SCENES PROGRESS. DURING THE SAN MIGUEL
MEETING EMISSARIES (INCLUDING THE PRESIDENT'S
SECRETARY GENERAL VILLAREAL) WERE REPORTED TO
HAVE SHUTTLED BETWEEN THE CONFERENCE AND THE
PRESIDENT'S OFFICE. THESE SPECULATIONS HAVE NOT
HOWEVER BEEN ENHANCED BY ANY NEW FACTS OR
APPARENT PROGRESS IN CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS
ON THE HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE.
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